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ABSTRACT

This paper recounts a difficult and valuable lesson in one educator's teaching career--when her students helped her to see a central flaw in her approach to the texts in a course entitled "Women in Literature." The paper first gives some background about the educator's preconceptions when she developed the material for the "Women in Literature" course, and how she envisioned the course as an application of the heroic journey pattern (such as in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" and "Paradise Lost"). It then states that the students noticed that there were more variations than similarities to the literature the class was reading, and that the selections did not fit the heroic journey pattern. The paper focuses on how the selections for the course differed from the heroic journey model, citing three major distinctions. It explains that, as a result of this class, the educator has at least one creative assignment every semester, and she builds into the paper topics an option by which students can intersect with the work. (NKA)

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"When the Professor is Wrong: Students helping Teachers to learn"

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This presentation is about one of the most difficult and valuable lesson of my teaching career—when my students helped me to see a central flaw in my approach to the texts in a course entitled "Women in Literature." The moment in the classroom where this interchange occurred, has become one of those moments of enlightenment for me, and I have spent some years reflecting on its significance. When I saw the convention description "Teaching Matters: Helping another to learn," I thought instantly about the semester that I walked away from the course doing most of the "learning."

First, some background about my preconceptions when I developed the material for the "Women in Literature" course. Much of my dissertation work prior to teaching this course was involved with analyzing the heroic journey pattern in traditional quest literature. This is the journey pattern described by Otto Rank, Jung, Neumann, and popularized by Joseph Campbell: where the hero receives the call; crosses the threshold into the unknown; separates from the community of origin; journeys into the wilderness and encounters trials and temptations which culminate in a great battle; receives the gift or 'boon,' generally in the form of humiliation; and returns to the community of origin profoundly changed. I chose my dissertation work around the

heroic journey pattern because I believed it to be a profoundly significant pattern for life.

Before I was asked to teach this particular women in literature class, I had for some years I taught a theme-based course on the heroic journey using a combination of traditional quest and contemporary literature (such works as *The Odyssey, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Paradise Lost, Faust,* and Bellow's *Henderson the Rain King*). In teaching the Women in Literature course, I was intrigued by the idea of applying this heroic journey pattern to stories about women. Joseph Campbell had indeed many times discussed the universal and genderless nature of this pattern and believed that to be the case.

I set about selecting a reading list of authors from a range of cultures that would reflect the diverse students (and largely adult learners) in my downtown San Francisco campus. I selected stories from Kate Chopin, Zora Neale Hurston, Tillie Olsen, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Maxine Hong Kingston. I selected stories that reflected some kind of journey that could be understood in an inward or spiritual context.

We began the class by reading the short medieval tale, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* in order to see the elements of the journey pattern in the context of story. We then read the women's literature and compare these patterns of call, separation, temptation, battle, humiliation, and return. At some point early in the semester, I was

elaborating on the heroic pattern in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. One of the students raised her hand and pointed out what was becoming increasingly obvious to everyone but me: this pattern had far more variations than similarities to the literature we were reading. The heroic journey pattern simply didn't fit with the literature under review.

I remember hearing this comment from the student and looking down at my lecture notes. My first reaction was shock, my second was anger, and my third was how to get off the topic until I could think more clearly about a response. And then I experienced one of those rare moments of clarity. When I looked up from my notes, I acknowledged that the student was right, closed my notebook, and entered into a dialogue with my students like I had never before experienced. From that point in the course, we abandoned my course plan, and began to explore what patterns were unique to the women in these texts.

When I reflect upon what energized the class at that early point in the semester, I see now that it was the moment I closed my notebook and became a learner along with the students. The students picked up on my letting go of a kind of authority and saw that their ideas meant something in the classroom. They saw that I really wanted to explore what was going on with these texts and that they were participating in a mutual learning experience.

Here are some of the revelations that came to us throughout this semester. First and foremost, was that the Campbell scheme was simply too limited a model for adequately understanding the kind of heroism defined in these texts.

SEPARATION, COMMUNITY, AND SEX

The first major variation to Campbell's monomyth has to do with the issue of separation. In order for the hero to begin his journey, separation from his original community is essential. Odysseus must leave Penelope, Mordaunt leaves Amavia, Sir Gawain leaves his friends at Sir Arthur's court. This ability to separate out requires a kind of privileged status on the part of the questor--in that the questor is healthy and unattached. Presumably the homeland is left in tack and generally the woman is looking after it. "Home" functions as a powerful metaphor for the questor on his journey--it is the safe zone that he can return to when (and sometimes if) his journey is successful. So what happens if you are the woman and it is time for the journey to begin? For the women heroes, separation is sometimes not an option: Eva (*Tell Me a Riddle*) is dying of cancer, Sethe *(Beloved*) is a slave woman, Celie (*Color Purple*) is bound to her abusive father. When the women are able to venture forth in some fashion--they do so at great risk and generally break some kind of taboo. So although Janie (*Their Eyes Were Watching God*) does leave her homeland at two different times in her life, in both

instances, she does so at great risk and breaks taboo with the community. Janie will not receive the hero's welcome in her return.

Another distinction between the monomyth and the woman's journey is related to the first, but specifically focuses on the issue of community. For these women, community is not always that which must be left behind for the journey to occur. It is from her community that Celie finds strength, and in which she is able to break away from the abusive relationships in her life. While Eva is dying of cancer, her relationship with her grandaughter provides a new context for her to put together her past life as a revolutionary in Russia with the process of her death. Yet for some questors, the community itself has become toxic--Sethe and Janie must leave in order to forge any kind of new life. Unlike Gawain or Osysseus, however, these women may never return to their original communities. There is no Penelope waiting with open arms--no anxious friends at court awaiting their return.

A third major distinction between these two journeys has to do with the issue of sex. In traditional quest literature, the hero will at some point encounter the seductress--the one who has the power to divert him from arriving at his true goal. The hero has the option of choosing or not choosing to 'dally' with the seducer. Odysseus stays with Circe for a year and could stay longer, but when he returns to the journey, he is none the worse for his stay. Sir Gawain would fail his journey by succumbing to the green lady, so he chooses the option to

abstain. The women in these texts are not so lucky. What precipitates Sethe's escape is sexual abuse by the nephews of the master. Celie is fourteen when she is raped by her stepfather. Maxine's story begins by breaking taboo--telling the forbidden story of her pregnant Aunt who committed suicide as the villagers burned her house. The experience of sexuality, in the woman's journey, is either not an option or leads to significant consequences (there is a birth to deal with).

INITIATION, HUMILIATION AND POWER

There are other distinctions between these journeys that are less categorical but are nevertheless present. In the traditional journey, the hero must at some point journey to the underworld (literally or figuratively). Odysseus must visit Tireses in Hades, Guyon must pass by the Bower of Bliss, Gawain must enter the enchanted castle. For the women we studied--more often than not--these women heroes began in the underworld. Celie, Sethe, and Janie begin at the bottom and journey out of there. These women did not have to go seeking the great battle, as their male counterparts, but begin in the great battle. Life seemed to initiate these women.

As the ordeals of initiation deepen in the journey, the hero must at some point encounter death (psychologically understood to be the death of ego). Sir Gawain looses his ego in the encounter with the green knight. The boon that he takes home from that encounter is, in fact, is

loss of ego--or humility. The green garter thus becomes a symbol of that humility.

For the female hero, loss of ego is not a goal to be achieved on the journey. Many of these women have no ego status to begin with (slave, child, wife) and what they gain on the journey is a sense of self or identity. Celie's moment of empowerment is in her response to Mr when he has just laughed at her attempt to curse him.

> Who you think you is? he say. You can't curse nobody. Look at you. You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam, he say, you nothing at all. (p.213)

The scene continues to intensify and Mr. is about to strike. Celie feels Shug shake her and responds:

> I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook, a voice say to everything listning, but I'm here.

Celie gains her voice and thereby gains her life. She has not achieved loss of ego, she has proclaimed her presence--her hereness--on earth. Her proclamation of presence enables her--for the first time--to find a life for herself. But before she can find a life, she has to become a self.

For years I was humiliated by this classroom experience. I saw the experience as one in which I was "busted" by my students and groped my way through to the end of the semester. I could feel the renewed energy in the class, but my obsession with my bias made me unable to appreciate the uniqueness of the learning experience at the time. These students empowered me to see my preconceived assumptions that I had

brought with me into the classroom and enabled me to alter the dynamics of the class. At the same time, I could see that they were empowered and enabled by the experience as well.

As a result of this class, I have changed the way I teach all of my literature classes. I have modified my classes in two significant ways. 1) I have at least one creative assignment every semester that allows for this kind of "shared authority" to occur. I participate in this assignment and present my material along with the class. For example, when we read Laura Esquival's *Like Water for Chocolate* and discuss the relationship between cooking and community, we write a class recipe book composed of recipes that are linked to stories. When we study journey literature, we write a journey poem and create a poetry collection. When we work with Sandra Cisnero's *The House on Mango Street,* students pattern her short chapters by creating vignettes of their life and we post these stories on the class web page. 2) I build into the paper topics an option by which students can intersect with the work. For example, in the drama class, I may ask "Are you—or anyone in your family—a character in the play *Death of a Salesman.* While reading August Wilson's The Piano Lesson, students may write a paper on Boy Willie's 'denied opportunity' and compare it to their own experience.